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The Edinburgh Legal History Blog

New Files on Slavery

Posted on [22/01/2014](#) by [John Cairns](#)

Some months ago it was revealed that a very substantial tranche of foreign office files was held outwith the National Archive at Kew; instead it had been “hoarded” in a repository in Buckinghamshire. Of course, under legislation, unless these files had been specially exempted from being made accessible, they should have been transferred to the National Archive. Of course, the conspiracy-minded have their own views on this.

But more recently it has emerged that some of these files apparently concern England’s and then Britain’s involvement in the slave-trade and then in its suppression. See <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jan/20/slave-trade-papers-illegal-foreign-office-cache> The now accessible inventory produced by the Foreign Office reveals 18 volumes of “slave trade reports” from 1662 to 1873 in six boxes amounting to 0.81 linear metres of shelving. There are also files on the slave trade in Brazil; files on Egypt concerning the suppression of the slave trade; files on Germany mentioning the slave trade; Madagascar files concerning the slave trade; files on Zanzibar concerning the slave trade and its suppression; and 117 metres of files headed “General Print”, in some of which the slave trade is mentioned. See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263829/Archive_inventory.csv/preview

Their significance can only be evaluated when they are made more accessible; but it seems unlikely that they will bring about a need to revise current historical interpretation. The story may be traced through the website of the Guardian or by googling. This was brought to your blogger’s attention by his colleague, Professor Alan Boyle. See <http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/people/alanboyle>

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